

# Sentences

## KEEPING SENTENCES CLEAR AND CONCISE

### SUNY POTSDAM COLLEGE WRITERS' BLOCK

## Components of a Sentence

A sentence is a single statement with both a subject and a verb. The subject is the actor, the verb the action. Without either of these things, a statement is not a sentence.

## Standard Sentence Formation

Sentences are clearest when the subject and verb are in the beginning of the sentence. It can be confusing if we don't know the subject until the middle or end, because we don't know what the writer is talking about. Look at this example.

**Confusing:** Fiddling with her beaded bag, which sat on her lap under the table, Hermione wasn't paying attention to the conversation.

**Clear:** Hermione wasn't paying attention to the conversation, instead fiddling with her beaded bag.

These two sentences say the same thing, but the order of the subject and verb is different. It's a lot easier to understand in the second sentence, when the subject is in the beginning of the sentence.

Keep introductory phrases short. It's great to use introductory phrases, but if they're too long, the reader may not know what the subject is.

**Confusing:** When the birds start flying south and the leaves start falling, winter seems to me to be coming soon.

**Clear:** I know winter is coming when the birds start flying south and the leaves start falling.

See how that makes a difference? In the first sentence, it seems like the birds might be the subject, until near the end. In the second sentence it is clear from the start that "I" is the subject.

**Ex.** Although he hated the winter with a passion and knew that moving to Canada meant living in the cold for over half the year, Matt decided to follow Greg to Ontario.

The basic sentence is *Matt decided to follow Greg to Ontario*. Everything else is introductory material. It might be important, but keeping the sentence this way risks confusion. It's better this way:

Matt hated the winter with a passion, and he knew that moving to Canada meant living in the cold for over half the year. Even so, he decided to follow Greg to Ontario.

Just putting the subject and verb in front makes the sentence so much clearer. In this case, there was so much “introductory information” that it worked better as its own sentence.

## Keep the Subject and Verb Close Together

Try to keep the subject and verb close to each other. When we read, we can hold about seven words in our memory at a time. If a subject is seven or more words apart from its verb, we have trouble making sense of the sentence.

Rosa, who was the daughter of the wealthiest man in the county and didn't let people forget it, knew her dad would pay for any legal trouble she had.

The basic sentence is *Rosa knew her dad would pay for any legal trouble she had*. The information in the middle of the sentence is important, but the subject and verb are so far apart that it can be hard to connect them. In a situation like this, it might be best to split the sentence into two:

Rosa was the daughter of the wealthiest man in the county, and she didn't let people forget it. She knew her dad would pay for any legal trouble she had.

Although you now have two sentences instead of one, both sentences are clear. It's better to have short, well-formed sentences than long ones that risk confusion.

## Passive Voice

All of the sentences above are in the active voice. The actor is the focus. A sentence can be in the passive voice too, though.

The ball was about to be thrown by the pitcher.

This sentence is passive. The active form would be *The pitcher threw the ball*.

Both sentences mean the same thing, and both are grammatically correct. We usually try to use the active voice, but sometimes the passive is needed. It takes the focus away from the actor. It can also be a nice change from a series of active sentences. Ex:

Katie swung the bat and hit the baseball. She watched the baseball soar into the air.  
Then she ran as fast as she could. Soon the ball would be caught in the outfielder's mitt.  
Katie kept running and made it to third base.

See how the active and passive work together? The sentence *Soon the ball would be caught in the outfielder's mitt* is passive, but the others are all active. Occasionally, you can use the passive voice to put the emphasis on the action instead of the actor, the process rather than the actor who is conducting that process. [More Information on Passive Voice](#)